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MATA SUNDRI JI

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HOMAGE

(1667—1747)

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I am a student of literature, and, in a small way, a litterateur as well. This article is not a research paper nor is meant to be a historical document. It is only a homage of a man of literature to Mata Sundri Ji. Mata Sundri does not figure much in the books of history but she is the centre of devotion for the masses. To get historically documented one does need to have significant achievements to one's credit, but to be a part of the social consciousness of a people and to live in the hearts of common human beings requires a far greater charisma. Mata Sundri was a repository of this eminence, No wonder she lives more in the minds and hearts of the masses than in the pages of history books. In fact a very important aspect of her personality is in being singularly free from the gross, mundane physicality, and to be a part of radiant everlasting value that inspires us by being one with our whole being. A Sikh temple (Gurudwara) and a post graduate college in the capital of India after the name of Mata Sundri are a living testimony of the same.

Both these institutions have been built and are being run by resources generated through common men's efforts. They are not extravagant displays of an individual's riches. They are like great poetry that lives in the hearts of the masses rather than rhetorical poems sung in praise of the effluent. This supra-material aspect of Mata Sundri needs constant iteration.

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Communication need not always be articulated. Silence itself carries a meaning that very often lies beyond the pale of words. This is specially true when the silence is perceived in a human context. The silence that envelops Mata Sundri and the silence about her in history represent a very important value, a cultural gesture. Silence is a gesture of respect towards the female sex. This is an important aspect of the Punjabi culture.

Guru Gobind Singh, himself a poet of great distinction, writes nothing about Mata Sundri just as he makes no allusion to his mother or his sons. He had fully realized that poetry is a social gesture and not a recording-file of one's own private anguish or ecstasy. Obviously Mata Sundri lived in a context and an atmosphere which was free from personal interest and any desire for self projection. The Guru family did not seek to establish its hegemony by getting itself identified as a special privileged body, And this is a salient characteristic of the Sikh religious ethos.

Silence may also sometimes indicate anger, dissatisfaction and disapproval. However, none of this attaches to Mata Sundri, specially as we know how adored she was in the Guru family and what a loving child she was at her parental place—Lahore, the capital of Punjab. In order to fulfil the wishes of her father that her marriage to Guru Gobind be solmenized in the royal city of Lahore, the Guru founded a new city called New Lahore and made a gesture of welcome to the new bride in this very novel way. Even a very private occasion like marriage is made & used by the Sikh Guru as an opportuning to do something where by the masses can be served in a lasting way.

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A city is a social entity. Even when founded by an individual it serves not the individual's ambitions but the aspirations of a whole community. The Sikh Gurus are known to have founded many cities—Kartarpur, Goindwal, Ramdaspur (Amritsar), Kiratpur, Anandpur to name but a few. These cities are the embodiment of an important message which is so typical of Sikh religion and its practice—the message of the superiority of the community over in individual, the message of universal brotherhood, the message of the greatest good of the largest number. The Bani, the Sakhi and the Parmarath all give the same message explicitly. The cities, the holy tanks the towers and the flags convey it implicitly.

Mata Sundri is a part of this implicit, silent but meaningful stream of the Sikh religious and social practice. She was only Sundri before marriage. The appelation 'Mata' before her name after her marriage to Guru Gobind is again in keeping with the traditional religious behaviour of the Sikhs. The title 'Mata' automatically accrues to the consort of a Guru even before she may have experienced maternity. Similarly 'Baba' is a title for a Guru's sons right from their birth although literally the term 'Baba' means an old man. Same is true of the terms 'Mukta' and 'Piara'. Mata that is mother, does not necessarily imply motherhood in the literal sense. In the Sikh tradition the proper name is not as important as the title that preceds it. In fact the name gets defined in the light of the title. Such titles speak of the ideals in conduct and behaviour that must be constantly pursued. The whole expression 'Mata Sundri' therefore becomes a carrier of a very special meaning and is part of the Sikh religious value pattern. In a way the term Mata Sundri gives us a clue

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to the status and the image of women in the Sikh social consciousness. 'Mata' has ethico-cum-social connotations. It stands for purity in love, sacrifice in need and a pervasive sense of warm nursing. Surdri stands for the beautiful. Beauty shorn of love, sacrifice and warmth can only be a destructive force just as the latter three qualities without the accompaniment of beauty can become a mechanical disciplinarian demand. The most beautiful relationships are those which are experienced both in their physical aspects (beauty) and realized in terms of an elevating significance (Mata).

The silence enveloping the marital relationship of Mata Sundri and Guru Gobind Singh suggests perfect harmony. Mata Sundri was always with the Guru — at Anandpur, at Nahan, at Paunta whether the Guru was hunting or writing poetry or fighting battles or meditating. Mata Sundri was a silent witness and a quiet support to the Guru at all the moments of his life. In a way she was a great aid to the Guru in achieving that degree of concenteration without which nothing meaningful can be apprehended. Her presence perfected and embalmed the solitude of the Guru with her benign and unobtrusive personality.

The self-abnegation of Mata Sundri can be measured from the fact that the historians are not of one view even as to her being the first or the second wife of Guru Gobind Singh. The utter humility of Mata Sundri is also evident from the fact that she issued no ordainment (Hukamnama) till 9 years after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. And a study of the texts of the Hukamnamas issued by her further illuminates her character. Most of the Hukamnamas are to seek contributions for the langer. Langer is a

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very very important Sikh practice as it represents the confluence of the physical as well as the spiritual values that inhere in the Sikh approach to life. Mata Sundri maintained this tradition assiduously. One of her Hukamnamas to the Sangat of Patna asking for twenty five rupees to be given for the marriage of the grand daughter of Bebe Nupi, is indicative of Mata Sundri's understanding of the need of social integration and solidarity among the Sikhs. Her Hukamnama to the five Sikhs to settle the dispute between Bhai lal Pala and Bhai Sango without any concession to anyone tells us about her high sense of justice. That she nominated Bhai Mani Singh as the chief priest at the Harimandir Sahib, Amritsar, proved to be an act of far sighted sagacity on the part of Mata Sundri. Bhai Mani Singh not only healed the breach between the Tat-Khalsa and the Bandai-Khalsa that could have had devastating consequences for the Sikh body-politic but also firmly established the tradition of scholarship and learning among the Sikhs. Mata Sundri Kept a watchful eye on Bhai Mani Singh who faithfully reported everything from Amritsar to Mata Sundri. Inspired by Mata Sundri Bhai Mani Singh began to collect, collate and verify the manuscripts of Guru Gobind Singh's writings which were finally authenticated by Mata Sundri. This tradition of research, editing and preservation of the literary heritage of Guru Gobind Singh was an act of enlightenment enunciated by Mata Sundri. Mata Sundri thus had a multi-faceted personality. She could bear hardships. She could stay silent. She could assert herself in the cause of justice and social integration. She was politically aware and took vital decisions. And she was conscious of the need of scholarship and learning.

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To be able to do it all and yet seek no publicity or credit is to live like a true Sikh and to conduct oneself in the manner of the beloved of the Guru.

And finally, a word about the style of writing that we meet in the Sikh Hukamnamas in general, and the Hukamnamas issued by Mata Sundri. Precise, terse and without any literary embellishments such are the hallmarks of the style of Hukamnamas. There is nothing redundant, the tone is neutral and the clarity is the most important feature of this style. And all this without being aggressive or abrasive. These indeed were the qualities of the character of Mata Sundri Ji also.

Abridged by B.S. Rattan, Department of English, S.G.T.B Khalsa College Delhi from the original text by Dr. Harbhajan Singh.

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Mata Sundri Ji

Mata Sundri Ji, the consort of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Master of Sikhs was born in 1967 A.D. at Lahore. Her father Bhai Ram Saran Ji was a respectable and prosperous Kumrav Khatri of Sikh faith. The little girl was bonny and beautiful. The parents with hearts of joy, pride and prayer named her Sundri, the beautiful one. True to her name she grew up to be an accomplished, enlightend and understanding person. She was pure in mind, bright in spirit and beautiful to behold.

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At the age of fourteen, Mata Sundri Ji was married to the great master at Guru Ka Lahore in Anandpur. As a bride she was decked with the choicest of finery and jewels that money could buy, but her most precious and priceless jewel was faith in God Almighty and her Lord and master. Mata Gujri Ji, the reverend mother of the great master welcomed and initiated her into the traditional activities of the household. The young and shy bride was conscious of her humble spiritual education and training. Her genius lay in its humility and readiness to welcome life's obligations. She learnt of life from life itself. She was blessed with a son, Sahibzada Ajit Singh in 1687. Mata Sundri Ji devoted herself whole-heartedly to the duties of a wife and mother.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji was the perfect husband, guide and teacher. Mata Sundri Ji became a true disciple of the Guru and attained great spiritual

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heights. He was the fountainhead of inspiration and devotion—it was a soul uplifting experience. Mata Sundri Ji was baptized with the sacred nectre on the vaisakhi of 1699 and became a member of the khalsa brotherhood. Mata Ji lived in self-discipline, obedience, prayer and protection. She completly dedicated herself and lived with ardour and inspiration, the life of the householder-com—'bhakat'. Life was rigorous, but sublime.. There was harmony, peace and bliss.

The thundering clouds of opposition, made up of the hill chieftains and the imperial moghul army, burst forth, and the peace of Anandpur including that of the ennobling and inspiring household was disturbed. Guru Gobind Singh at the bidding of the khalsa decided to leave Anandpur. Sahibzada Ajit Singh and Sahibzada Fateh Singh accompanied the Guru along with other followers and later fell in battle. The younger Sahibzadas along with grand mother Mata Gujri Ji left for Sirhind, sscorted by Gangu, the cook of the family, who betrayed them to Wazirkhan, the Governor of Sirhind. Mata Sundri Ji and Mata Sahib Devanji* at the bidding of the Guru came to Delhi, accompanied by Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Dhanna Singh and Bhai Jawahar Singh and took up residence at Kucha Dilwali near Ajmeri Gate, and made Delhi their home. Both the mothers were constant companion and source of strength to one another. The Sikhs of the city of Delhi, flocked to have darshan of the holy mothers and get news of the Guru and his plans. Simple folks came to pay homage with gifts. Separated from the presence and protection of the Guru's nearness and affection of the children and Mata Gujriji, the holy mothers spent

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their time in meditation, prayer and awaiting news. At last the news came of the heroic sacrifices of their children Ajit Singh Ji and Fateh Singh Ji aged 16 and 14 who fell in battle claiming the glory of God. Jujhar Singhji and Zorawar Singhji aged 9 and 7 walked with dignity and difiance into the suffocating, choking and torturing walled chamber at Sirhind. The tragic news of Mata Gujri's passing away also trickled in.

Mataji's grief and pain was boundless. This was shared by all the Khalsa. Mataji's faith came to her rescue, God Almighty had ordained it and she found solace and strength in submitting to His will. Mataji's residence became the centre of Sikh faith and people from all walks of life, with all the human problems came for attention, affection, sympathy and solution.

In 1705 the holy mothers went to Sahibo Ki Talwandi in Bhatinda District Punjab (now known as Damdamman Sahib) to be in the presence of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. They also participated in the celebrations on the compilation of the Adi Granth. On their return from Damdamman Sahib, the holy mothers resided at Matia Mahal near Jama Masjid. Guru Gobind Singh Ji visited Delhi in 1707 and on his way to Nanded in Deccan, Mata Sahib Devan accompained him. Mata Sundri Ji at the invitation of Sikhs in Mathura paid a visit and was there for an year.

The Sikh population of Delhi, numbering 1700, bought land near Turakman Gate and constructed a house and gifted it to Mataji for occupation on her return from Mathura. Mata Sahib Devan on her return from Deccan joined Mata Sundri Ji and the

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residence came to be known as Mata Sundriji's Haveli and at present is known as Mata Sundri Gurudwara. Daily routine of meditation, prayers and worship was practised by the holy and pious mothers. Sikhs and others seeking mental and spiritual salvation came to the place.

The troubled, lowly and the distressed all were welcome irrespective of caste, colour, creed or poverty.

In 1708, the news of the Guru's passing away reached Delhi. The Sikhs rushed to Mataji with grief, pain and suffering writ large on faces. They came seeking strength and direction from her. It was the dark zero hour, the supreme stark test of a life time.

Mataji in her anguish realized that she could not express her own grief, sorrow and suffering at the separation from the Master, but had to be a pillar of support and strength to others. The consciousness of her mission, the concept of duty and discipline ingrained in herself helped her to make the choice of leading the Sikhs. The mantle of guiding the Sikhs according to the ideals of the Guru fell on her shoulders. With unruffled calm and eternal serenity so characteristic of her personality, she dedicated her whole being to the service of the Khalsa and elevated her life to her ideal. Mataji became the leader of the Sikhs and managed the affairs of the Khalsa with verve wisdom, might and mercy from her seat at Mata Sundri Gurudwara. The place became the life and nerve centre of Sikh religion and politics. The Sikhs at the time were scattered all over the length and breadth of the country. Moreover, many self-appointed leaders to

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serve their own ends tried to mislead and create rift and disunity. Mataji settled their differences amicably and brought them under one organization.

Mataji also put the holy places and shrines under one central administration and improved their functioning. So that they become inspiring centres of Sikh faith and worship. To man these centres she appointed learned men. Bhai Mani Singh was appointed the first head priest of Harimandir, Amritsar. They were all accountable to her and reported regularly. Mataji sent them commands under her seal.

The greatest task that Mataji took upon herself was the collection of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji's inspired revelations and compiling them in the Dasam Granth. Mataji also established an academy at Amritsar for research and training in Adi Granth. The academy to this day is functioning as a great centre of knowledge. Mataji's residence, the Mata Sundri Gurudwara became a haven of peace and spiritual salvation. Every morning and evening Sikh congregation gathered for for prayer, meditation, and religious discourses. The holy mothers personally looked after the comforts of each and every visitor. langar was supervised and served by them. Disputs were solved the needy were helped and guided.

The holy mothers also devoted time to study the Vaani of the Great Master and Bhai Shiayan took down dictation.

Mata Sahib Devan, the holy virgin mother, who since 1701 was constant companion, friend, philosopher and admirer of Mata Sundri Ji, left for her he avenly abode creating a great vacc\m in

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Mataji's life. Mata Sundri Ji joined her in 1747 after successfully completing her life's mission and weaving her name in gold in the fabric of human history.

*Mata Sahib Devan a divine is known as the virgin mother of the Khalsa. She wedded the Guru in 1761, when He had already taken a vow of calibacy.

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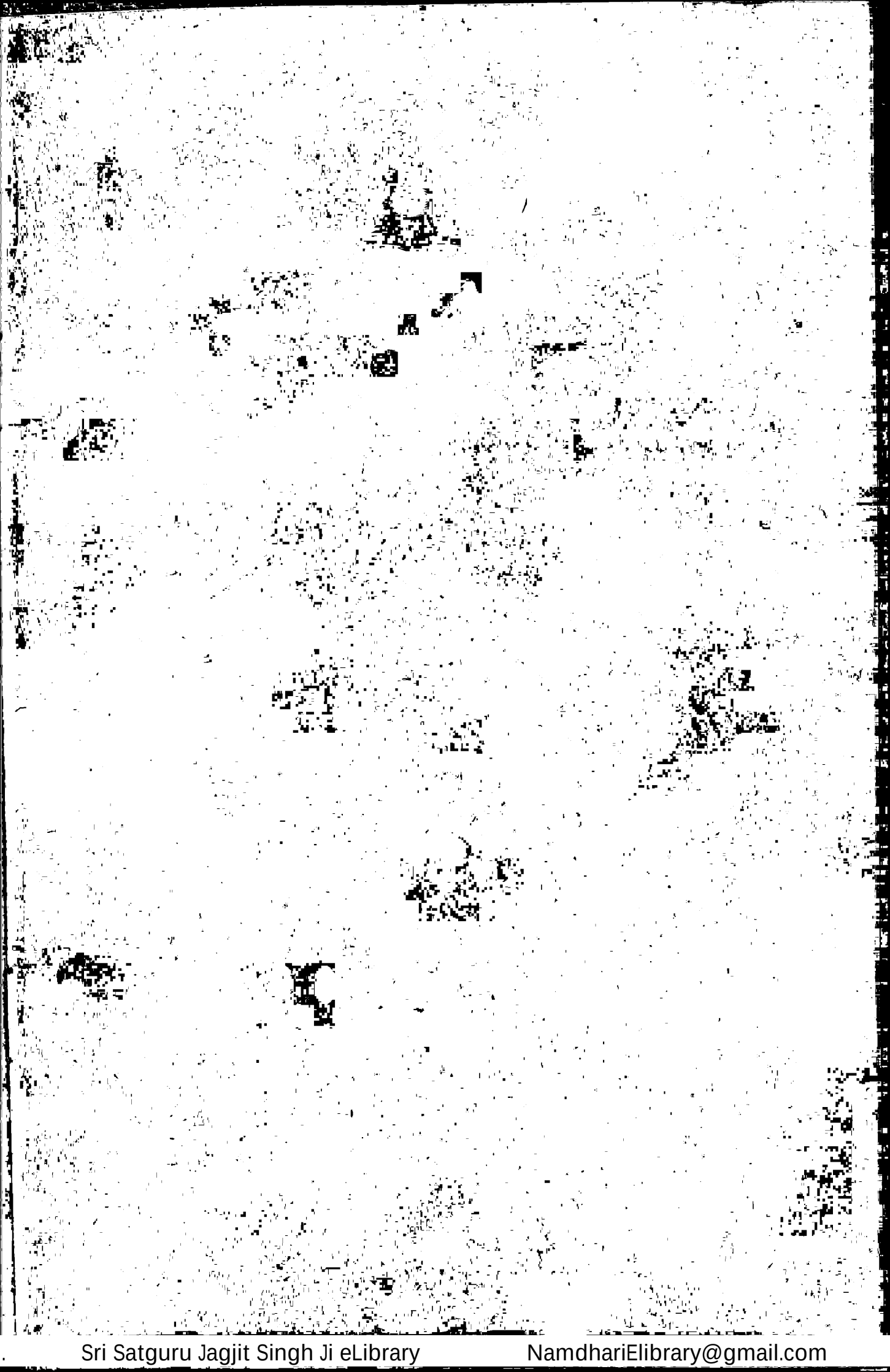

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